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In Other Words

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Polish Colonial Past and Postcolonial Presence in Joanna Rajkowska's Art

Since within postcolonial studies, the term “colonialism” usually applies to an overseas exploitation of ethnically diverse people, the title of this essay may seem somewhat confusing. I will first explain why I believe that both Polish history and self-perception can be discussed within postcolonial theory. This introduction will facilitate the further goal of this essay, which is relating the works of Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska to the difficulties still experienced in Poland when discussing its past. These difficulties obstruct shaping Poland's relationships both with neighboring countries and with people who have lived in Poland for centuries but have not been perceived as “essentially” Polish. In this essay, I want to claim that Joanna Rajkowska offers a novel and possibly effective way to address some of the traumatic complexities of Polish history.

Addressing the controversy of discussing Central Europe through the categories of postcolonialism, Janusz Korek, professor in Slavic languages at Stockholm University points out that “[o]pponents of the application of postcolonial theories to the area of Central Europe emphasise that we are not dealing here with classical colonies, which are distant and lie across the seas, in relation to the imperial centre,” at the same time arguing that the “internal logic [of colonialism] can be seen without difficulty in the lands of Central and Eastern Europe.” According to Korek, this is a matter of liberating oneself from “a purely geographical and literary-studies point of view” and focusing on “the essence of the relationship between empire and the conquered, between the centre and the provinces, and on that which evokes and strengthens the political and cultural situations of hegemony and serfdom, domination and subordination.”¹ Slavic studies professor Ewa Thompson makes a similar claim, defining colonialism as a “military conquest of a territory and people, who already have their own national awareness, political system, law, language and customs” and “transforming [them] (with the use of force) (...) into a periphery.”² Both Korek and Thomson then liberate the notion of colonialism from strict geographical limitations.

Viewing Central and Eastern Europe in the light of Korek's and Thomson's arguments, it can be claimed that the region bears characteristics of a postcolonial periphery. For example, as argued by Polish sociologist Tomasz Zarycki, over twenty years after the Round Table Talks in Warsaw and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Poles (just like Lithuanians and Hungarians) “keep arguing about their attitude towards the non-existent Soviet empire.”³ It turns out that a collectively shared mental after-image of the hegemon, who is no longer physically present, lives on as a major point of reference in the symbolic framework of the once-occupied people. In fact, scholars who believe that Central and Eastern Europe can be discussed within the postcolonial theory framework have produced a considerable amount of scholarship.⁴ Recently, this discourse has gained such momentum that some scholars postulate the incorporation of the region as a fully-fledged candidate for close analysis through a postcolonial theory lens. For example, Clare Cavanagh, professor of Russian and Polish

¹ Janusz Korek, “Central and Eastern Europe from a Postcolonial Perspective.” *Postcolonial Europe*, 2009, <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/index.php/en/essays/60--central-and-eastern-europe-from-a-postcolonial-perspective> (accessed August 26, 2010). On the other hand, Polish literature professor Grażyna Borkowska in her article “Polskie doświadczenie kolonialne [Polish colonial experience]” disagrees with this perspective claiming that “extending the idea of postcolonialism to cover every cultural power discourse seems to be an illogical abuse, ruining the gravity of Said's claims. Said has reserved postcolonialism to refer to relations between such cultures where one culture, because of its exoticism or remoteness from recognized centers did not have its own representation and thus was doomed to a foreign discourse. This understanding can in no way refer to relations between European cultures or towards Russia.” This article was published in *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2007): 15-24.

² Ewa Thompson, “Historia Europy Środkowej jako narracja postkolonialna,” *Official Website of Polish Human Rights Defender*, <http://www.rpo.gov.pl/pliki/12577798430.pdf> (accessed August 26, 2010).

³ Tomasz Zarycki, “Podział postkomunistyczny czy postkolonialny? O naturze polskich ‘podziałów historycznych,’” *Europa* 67 (2005): 18.

⁴ Among scholars who in various ways have analyzed Eastern and Central Europe from the postcolonial perspective are: Ewa Thompson, Clare Cavanagh, Bogusław Bakula, Andrzej Nowak, Maria Szmeja, Bohdan Jałowicki, Zdzisław Krasnodębski, Michał Buchowski, Tomasz Zarycki, Daniel Beauvois, Iver Neuman and Attyla Melegh. However, much of the scholarship is available only in Polish. An exhaustive overview of the debate can be found in: T. Zarycki, “Polska i jej regiony a debata postkolonialna” published in *Oblicze polityczne regionów Polski*, ed. M. Dajnowicz (Białystok: Wyższa Szkoła Finansów i Zarządzania, 2008), 31-48.

literature at Northwestern University, has criticized Edward Said for his focusing on the First and Third World countries, while ignoring the countries of the Soviet Bloc.⁵

The argument that Poland is a postcolonial country has been made in a two-fold, complementary way. On the one hand, scholars have pointed out that, at various points in history, Poland fell victim to colonial imperialism of European hegemony, most notably Russia, Prussia, and Austria. On the other, Poland colonized areas located directly to its east. The political and symbolic effects of this dual, contradictory Polish position on the international scene are still visible and painfully debated in Poland. For example, Ewa Thompson argues that by being positioned and positioning itself as a periphery of the civilized West, Poles to this day experience a sense of inferiority, typical of once-colonized communities. In accordance with this claim, Polish right-wing commentator and activist Konrad Bonisławski discusses the rhetoric employed by some Polish politicians which, according to him, bears the stigma of a post-colonial mentality. To prove his claim, he quotes opinions voiced when Poland was discussing the possible ratification of the Constitution of the European Union: “Those who don’t want to sign it, act in the best interest of Russia” or “We don’t criticize the European Union, because it’s them and they are always better than us.”⁶ Following Thompson, Bonisławski goes as far as to claim that after the fall of the Soviet Union, Poland started to seek a “substitute hegemon”⁷ and has found it in the form of the United States, Germany, or the whole European Union, in relation to which it once again locates itself in the most familiar, that is, subordinate, position.⁸

What is more, this customarily dependent Polish position in relation to its hegemony has resulted in a particular politics of representation. As Thompson points out, the post-WWII Western academic and mainstream discourse on Central and Eastern Europe operated according to a postcolonial logic. She argues that during the Cold War and the Soviet occupation of Poland, the knowledge about the region was delivered by the colonial hegemony (by which she means Western powers):

The final result was the loss of control over one’s own image, its reification and essentialization which can be compared (...) to the 19th century descriptions of black Africa. (...) One part of this process is the fact that since the late 19th century there has functioned a concept of “Eastern Europe,” which during the Cold War became in the USA a standard designating something like a separate continent.⁹

This, she claims, is the reason why Poland has very often been perceived and referred to as a “chauvinistic, primitive, and intolerant” country. Echoing Thompson, British history professor Norman Davies notes that to this day Slavic studies discourse produced in the West often falls victim to stereotypes and distortions similar to those once applied to the category of the Orient.¹⁰ Additionally, Polish literature historian Monika Rudaś-Grodzka states that, historically speaking, Slavic people were often described as slavish, passive and

⁵ Clare Cavanagh, “Postkolonialna Polska: biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii,” in: *Teksty Drugie* 2/3 (2003): 61.

⁶ Konrad Bonisławski, “W poszukiwaniu zastępczego hegemonu,” *Polityka Narodowa* June 2008, <http://polityka-narodowa.pl/index.php/2010/01/bonislawski-w-poszukiwaniu-zastepczego-hegemonu-kolonialna-mentalnosc-polskich-elit/> (accessed March 22, 2011).

⁷ Ewa Thompson expressed this idea in her article “W kolejce po aprobatę: kolonialna mentalność polskich elit,” published in *Europa* 180 (2007): 8.

⁸ Bonisławski, “W poszukiwaniu.”

⁹ Thompson, “Historia Europy Środkowej.” Polish sociologist Tomasz Zarycki claims that until today, Polish political scene is divided along the postcolonial lines. He argues that the essence of Polish politics centers around the politicians’ attitude towards Moscow perceived as a decision-making imperial center, with Poland perceived as a Russian colony. Zarycki believes that, symbolically speaking, this obsession with Moscow is still valid among Polish politicians. However, for several years, Poland has been focused on the West, which results in a highly mythologized representation of the West in Poland. He discusses this issue in his article Tomasz Zarycki, “Podział postkomunistyczny czy postkolonialny? O naturze polskich ‘podziałów historycznych’ ” that can be found in *Europa* 67 (2005).

¹⁰ Davies’ argument is discussed by Maria Janion in *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), 10.

submissive.¹¹ As a result, etymologically speaking, there is a link between “Slavic” and German “der Slawe – der Sklave” and English “slave;” and in popular discourse, there are Polish jokes.¹²

The roots of such stereotyping hark back at least to the 18th century. In one of her essays, Thompson briefly sketches Polish history from a postcolonial perspective. She notes that in 18th century Europe, white-on-white colonialism devoured Croatia, Serbia, Moldova, Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland. In the particular case of Poland, this process culminated in the partitions of the late 18th century, as a result of which Poland was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria, losing independence for over one hundred years to reappear only in 1918 with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.¹³ It is this historical heritage, according to Thompson, that forms a basis for the present Polish tendency to position itself in an inferior position to the West. On the other hand, Polish literature professor Maria Janion notes that Poland itself has acted as a colonizer in the territories located to the east of Poland. She discusses the utopian Polish myth-making narratives that were to justify Polish actions, just as similar narratives were employed to justify the exploitation of colonized people in other parts of the world.¹⁴ Janion draws parallels between Said’s West-constructed notion of Orientalism and the European (Poland included) notion of the “non-European East.”¹⁵ Similarly, Thompson notes that, before it was colonized, Poland itself colonized its Eastern neighbors: Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus. Moreover, Polish literature professor Grażyna Borkowska, in her essay “Polish colonial experience,” discusses Polish colonial aspirations voiced in the 1930s by the one million members of Maritime and Colonial League who wanted to settle Cameroon and other territories in Africa claiming that “Poland must have colonies.”¹⁶

This unreconciled dualism of Polish historical experience is vividly reflected in Polish self-narratives of today. Commenting on the ambivalence of Poland’s position in reference to colonialism, Janion talks about what she calls a “paradoxical Polish postcolonial mentality,”¹⁷ which manifests itself in Polish inferiority complex towards Western countries and superiority complex towards its Eastern neighbors. Janion notes that such vicarious self-identification results in Poland’s failure to construct an independent identity, one that would refer neither to the “civilized West” nor to the “barbaric East.” The result is two-fold: on the one hand, Poland tends to perceive itself as an eternal victim of history, constantly persecuted by its neighbors or by its tragic fate. Clear manifestations of this martyrologic self-perception are the extremely influential, redemptive theories developed during 19th-century Romanticism, in which Poland was featured as a new Messiah of the nations, or Christ on the cross suffering for the millions.¹⁸ Polish painters of the time featured Poland (or Polonia) as a beautiful, vulnerable woman in black, awaiting her death at the hands of her captors (fig. 1).¹⁹ To this day, Virgin Mary is lauded as the Queen of Poland: just as Mary sacrificed her son for the sake of humanity, so have Polish mothers continuously sacrificed their sons for the sake of Poland. These martyrologic visions, however, have gone hand in hand with a much different, nationalistic discourse that aimed to interpret Poland’s relationships with its Eastern neighbors. In this narrative, Poland has been presented as a light-bearer, who brings the treasures of

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² An insightful analysis of this discourse can be found in an essay by professor in Polish Language and Literature Leonard Neuger titled “Central Europe as a Problem.” There Neuger quotes from 19th-century European intellectuals (Fichte, Heine, Musil) who produced a stereotypical colonial discourse on Poland and Eastern Europe. Neuger’s essay is available in English at: <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu>, the website of *Postcolonial Europe*, a peer-reviewed journal of literary and cultural studies, published in cooperation with Stockholm University.

¹³ Thompson, “Historia Europy Środkowej.”

¹⁴ Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, 165-176. The most recognized product of this narrative is the concept of Kresy (“outskirts,” “borderlands”). It refers to the area now part of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. From 1569 until 1795, when Poland was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria, Kresy was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the First and Second World Wars, Kresy briefly belonged to Poland again to be lost in 1945 when the Yalta Treaty was signed. To this day in Poland, the idea of Kresy tends to be both mythologized and demythologized in public discourse, film, literature and in casual conversations.

¹⁵ Ibid., 213-243.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17-23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁸ A major herald of Polish messianism was Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most celebrated figures of Polish Romanticism.

¹⁹ A more striking example comes from Ary Sheffer who in his 1861 painting titled *Polonia* featured Polonia as a naked, dead woman stamped by the hooves of the occupier’s horse.

Western civilization East, and serves as a bridge between the civilized West and the barbarian East. Within this narrative, the East has been presented as obscure and backward, holding to a conservative and distinct tradition of Russian Orthodox Church.²⁰

This split Polish self-perception may partly explain the tensions that arise in Polish debates concerning the country's current foreign and domestic policy. Historical experience not only hampers unambiguous relationships with Russia and Germany, but also translates into debates concerning the idea of "Polishness" or what it means to be Polish. In a country with historically movable (or even disappearing) borders, a country which has been both the occupier and the occupied, a country that once had the largest Jewish population in Europe, part of the public discourse on Poland is still constructed around notions of "the real Poles," "the Polish nation," "true patriotism," or "Polish national values." This narrative tends to be exclusive, xenophobic and even racist, and one of the reoccurring motifs is that various people who lived in Poland for centuries are not perceived as "essentially" Polish. These include the Jewish, Tatar, Russian Orthodox, Protestant and other minorities. What is more, these internal "others" tend to be relegated to the margins of public debates, as commentators focus on Poland's foreign policy, its position and role in the European Union, its contacts with Russia or Germany and, less so, with the former Soviet republics. As a result, Polish "internal others" are virtually absent in the public discourse and this is only slowly changing.

Thus it turns out that the complexities of Polish colonial history form an obstacle not only in shaping trusting relationships with its historical hegemony, but also – and more importantly for this essay – with its internal "others," no matter how small is their actual physical presence in today's Poland.²¹ Crucially, Poland of today is the most ethnically homogenous country in the European Union, which means that in fact there is virtually no "other" that could potentially be a source of tensions. Yet, many Poles seem to be living in a country haunted by the ghosts of the past, who in some cases have an even greater hold over people's minds than any living person. What I mean here is the uneasiness triggered by phrases such as "living in a once-Jewish house" or "retaining a once-German property." Clear examples of such anxieties are the overblown Polish reactions to Erika Steinbach's Centre against Expulsions,²² or Jan Tomasz Gross' books.²³ It seems that this elusive, yet omnipresent "otherness" produces unidentified fear, and effectively haunts the Polish collective consciousness (and subconsciousness), thus stifling debates. It is manifested in some people lowering their voices when saying "Jewish,"²⁴ hysterical reactions to Gross' books and Steinbach's endeavors, conventionalized anti-Semitic graffiti that appear on building facades or walls, and instances of vandalizing old, non-Catholic cemeteries. The historically understandable need for sustaining a purely positive image of Poland's heroic past results in blaming "the others" for all the wrongdoings. All this leads to difficulty in approaching Polish past in its complexity: with Poles being both victims and occupiers, both heroes and scoundrels, and for the most part – anything in between.

In this essay, I want to argue that the only way to make sense of the past and effectively discuss Polish national identity of today is to step out of the postcolonial binary victim/occupier paradigm. Such approach welcomes the following questions: Can Poland's relationships with its various "others" be discussed by going beyond the binary paradigm of being either a victim or an occupier? Is it possible to form a discourse that would not resort to categories of "the real Poles" and which would emphasize historical complexities rather than simplify them? Or, to put it in philosophical and at the same time cynical terms: is it possible to stop thinking in terms of Slavoj Žižek understanding of national identity, as recounted by Janion:

²⁰ Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, 214-227.

²¹ The Jews, once the largest minority living in Poland, virtually disappeared as a result of World War II. The remaining handful was almost completely chased out of socialist Poland in 1968 in an ethnic cleansing inspired by the then Polish government.

²² Erika Steinbach is a co-founder of the Centre for the Expellees, a foundation which seeks to found a museum commemorating "all victims of expulsion and genocide," including Germans expelled from the territory assigned to Poland in the aftermath of the Second World War. The official website of the Centre for the Expellees can be found at <http://www.z-g-v.de/english/aktuelles/?id=35>.

²³ Jan Tomasz Gross published *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001), *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (2006), and *Golden Harvest* (2011). As much as they reveal significant facts, Gross' books present a one-sided point of view, for which the author has been heavily criticized. For example, Norman Davies described *Neighbors* as "deeply unfair to Poles," as in his estimate there were about 10,000 Jewish pogroms during World War II and Poles participated only in two or three of them. Davies published this opinion in "Strach to nie analiza, lecz publicystyka," *Gazeta Wyborcza* January 21, 2008, <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80708,4854594.html> (accessed March 22, 2011).

²⁴ I owe this remark to Professor Michał Głowiński.

[According to Slavoj Žižek] national and ethnic identity is based on fundamentalism, and fundamentalism needs an Other – to hate it, blame it and persecute it for depriving (...) us of what is more precious to us, and at the same time indefinite (e.g. national spirit).²⁵

Giving up on such fundamentalist understanding of national identity demands an acceptance of the fact that the very idea of a clear-cut national identity is an illusion, and, by the same token, that otherness is not a clear-cut concept. By lifting the necessity of identifying with either, one can possibly relate to history in a way which is not primarily collective but individual. This would however produce a demand to “dismantle dominating mental clichés,”²⁶ look for complexities rather than generalizations and think along nominalistic lines instead of thinking in terms of “nations,” “national identity,” “us,” “others,” “victims of history,” “occupiers,” etc. Still, it seems that Poland remains so wrapped up in the contradictory self-perception of its simultaneous victimization and moral superiority that it is only beginning to seriously confront the need to assess this matter. Most often, this difficulty results in what Polish anthropology professor Joanna Tokarska-Bakir calls “the Polish obsession with innocence,”²⁷ that is Poland’s inability to acknowledge its own wrongdoings.²⁸ Examples are numerous: the still prevailing myth-making and positive assessment of the aforementioned Polish colonization of the countries located to its east, or the enormous difficulty in talking about the Jewish pogroms in Poland (most notably and infamously the one in Jedwabne). Recently, this inability has been reflected in the mistrust voiced by some Polish politicians and commentators in reference to the way Russia is handling the investigation of the crash of the Polish government’s plane, while refusing to admit to Polish mistakes.²⁹

Clearly, as I will argue in the following sections of this essay, political and academic discourses are not the only channels to discuss these matters. Another channel, the one that I would like to examine, is visual art. I want to discuss the political and historiographical potential of art by focusing on several works by Joanna Rajkowska, who for over ten years has been working in Poland in the public space. In my view, Rajkowska creates both spatial and conceptual framework that allows one to step outside the us/them paradigm and tackles the question of how to deal with Poland’s symbolic ghosts of the past in a highly individualistic and possibly effective way. Her art seems to offer a new type of discourse which confronts complex Polish history in a non-binary way and does not pass easy judgments. In her artist statement, Rajkowska explains:

I work in public space. My projects are usually set in places that are burdened with past traumas, of where social or ethnic antagonisms are present. I do not try to achieve consensus, do not solve conflicts. I understand my work as creating a space where these tensions can actually manifest themselves.³⁰

I will analyze Rajkowska’s attempts on the example of her three installations (figures 2, 3, and 4), all of which invade public space: *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie* (Warsaw, 2002 –), *Oxygenator* (Warsaw, 2007), and the most recent and probably not-to-be *Minaret* (Poznań, 2009 –). By their very size and location, the three works physically introduce the category of “the other”: Rajkowska confronts onlookers with massive objects or installations that are placed in the middle of the city and are blatantly misplaced, sometimes dream-like, and feel

²⁵ Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, 23.

²⁶ Stanisław Ruksza, “Utopia od podstaw,” in *Rajkowska. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010), 8.

²⁷ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2004), 13-22.

²⁸ I realize that this does not refer to all people in Poland; I am nevertheless concerned with an extremely lively current in Polish public discourse which encourages Poles to construct their national identity around the idea of Poland having always been an innocent victim of hostile forces (Russians, Germans, and most recently, “the West,” referred to as “the civilization of death”). “In the Shadow of Empires: Postcolonialism in Central and Eastern Europe — Why not?,” Polish philology professor Aleksander Fiut provides an interesting analysis of the intricacies that appear when one applies postcolonial theory to Central and Eastern Europe. He emphasizes the necessity to give up “sweeping concepts” and apply “small-scale” narratives. Fiut’s article can be found at *Postcolonial Europe*, 2009 <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/index.php/en/essays/58--in-the-shadow-of-empires-> (accessed August 26, 2010).

²⁹ Here I refer to the crash near Smoleńsk, Russia, which took place on April 10, 2010, during which 96 Polish officials, including Polish President Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria Kaczyńska, died. They were on their way to Katyń to commemorate the murder of over 2,000 Polish officers by the Soviets in 1940. In socialist Poland, this murder was an open secret, as the truth was repressed by the authorities.

³⁰ Joanna Rajkowska, “The Artist’s Statement,” *Joanna Rajkowska Official Website* <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/statement.php> (accessed December 18, 2010).

like foreign inserts or even – intrusions. Passers-by are thus confronted with objects that screamingly do not belong to the place. As the artist claims,

My projects are born through collaboration with people. In the events I create, the key elements are those of fiction and holiday, of putting reality into brackets through small interventions in the existing context, exchanging/adding new elements or naming/renaming them. I force the viewer to relate to change, to build a new emotional relationship, to situate themselves in a new, changed landscape.³¹

By the very fact of their blatant misplacement, Rajkowska's installations are political, as they provoke questions concerning Polishness or Polish identity. They challenge not only public space, but also public discourse, since they question homogenous representations of Poland. They ambiguously hint at diversity and blur the clear-cut division into "us" and "others." At the same time, through their non-patronizing, open character, they welcome various readings, sometimes radically different from the intentions of the artist.

Rajkowska's understanding of art seems to ring in accord with French theorist Jacques Rancière's idea of perceiving aesthetics as a political agent. In what he calls "the distribution of the sensible,"³² Rancière claims that since art reconfigures reality by making yet-non-existent things present and visible, it directly affects the observers'/participants' senses and thus involuntarily forces them to reconceptualize their world perception, as this kind of art calls for a new type of discourse.³³ Similarly, Rajkowska, by creating unfamiliar contexts and locating them in familiar yet traumatic places, experiments with participants' reactions and opens up new dimensions to address the past at the same demanding a new type of discourse. In accordance with Rancière, she makes things visible in a new way by directly affecting the senses of the recipients: confronted with her works, they cannot resist being somehow affected, feeling something. Also, just as Rancière stresses the category of playfulness,³⁴ so does Rajkowska: her installations tend to be non-aggressive and playful, neither patronizing nor traumatic.

Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie, which is the only work that exists today, came into being as a result of Rajkowska's 2001 visit to Israel where she was shocked to experience Jewish aversion towards her being Polish. Upon her return to Warsaw, unable to relate to the once Jew-populated and now Jew-less city, Rajkowska did some research and found out that the name "Aleje Jerozolimskie" (Jerusalem Avenue) came from the name "New Jerusalem," an 18th-century Jewish settlement on the outskirts of Warsaw which existed for two years before it was dismantled by a group of Warsaw merchants and craftsmen, jealous of the settlement's financial prosperity.³⁵ As a result, Rajkowska came up with an idea to plant numerous palm trees all along Aleje Jerozolimskie. Eventually, realizing that the grandiosity of her project made it impossible to carry out, she decided to go ahead with only one, plastic palm tree. As its location, she chose the intersection of Aleje Jerozolimskie and Nowy Świat, both major Warsaw streets. Thinking about her project, Rajkowska envisioned

Someone who after a long journey from Lviv steps off the train at 6:50 in the morning, walks through the dirty underground passages of Central Station, and heads towards Nowy Świat. Suddenly, they rub their eyes. They see a palm tree. (...) Or someone else who (...) looks up and sees the tropics, or the Middle East, or Mexico, something that does not belong here but nevertheless is here.³⁶

³¹ Ibid.

³² In Rancière's book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, the following definition of "distribution of the sensible" is given: "[it] refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done. Strictly speaking, 'distribution' therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion." The quotation can be found in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, transl. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 85.

³³ Jacques Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka*, transl. Julian Kutyła and Paweł Mościcki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), 21-39.

³⁴ Jacques Rancière emphasizes the importance of the category of play (*jeu*) in the aesthetic experience. He refers to Immanuel Kant's analysis of the beautiful (see: *Critique of Judgment*) and Friedrich Schiller's "Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man." Basically speaking, the idea is that aesthetic experience must be lived through in a spontaneous way. It comes, it happens, it cannot be forced.

³⁵ Joanna Rajkowska, "Niby, żeby, jest," in *Rajkowska. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010), 30-31.

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

At the same time, she was well aware of the political charge incorporated in her project. Even though, according to Rajkowska, the palm tree had a “great power of deconstruction and put everything around it in brackets,” at the same time “awakened the demon of anti-Semitism and was a punch in the face of right-wing attachment to ritualistically understood Christian values.”³⁷ One of the points of contention was the fact that, until the erection of Rajkowska’s palm tree in 2002, Warsaw authorities placed the Christmas tree at the very intersection of Nowy Świat and Aleje Jerozolimskie.³⁸ This spatial clash did not escape the attention of the conservative mayor of Warsaw and future President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, who announced:

The palm tree emerged by agreement with former Warsaw authorities. (...) Customarily, this was the place where during Christmas the Christmas tree was placed. This is our tradition that we should cultivate. As for now we are bound with an agreement [for the palm tree to stay], but when it ceases, ideas of this sort will not be tolerated.³⁹

And yet so far, the palm tree has resisted all attempts to remove it. However, during its eight-year life, it has gone through various stages. Once leafless (due to technical problems), in the summer of 2007, it was symbolically colonized by Polish nurses, then on strike. The palm tree was dressed in a nurse’s hat and one of the nurses stated that “This is no palm tree. This is a nurse!”⁴⁰ The parallel was quite simple: with their subsistence wages and the temptation to emigrate, Polish nurses felt as alien and excluded from the public discourse and the interest of the politicians as the absurd, plastic palm tree. However, it took years for the palm tree to grow into the fabric of the city.⁴¹ Celebrated by some and criticized or simply rejected by others, analyzed through categories of camp and kitsch by academics, Rajkowska’s plastic palm tree has eventually become one of the most recognizable symbols of Warsaw. At the same time, the installation seems to have lost the original symbolic intention of the author: hardly ever is the palm tree linked with the historical origins of the title “Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue” or with the historical presence of Jews in Poland. For the most part, it lives a life of its own: as a meeting point, as a point of reference for aesthetic discourse, or as a tourist attraction.

Another example of Rajkowska’s attempts to tackle Polish colonial past is *Oxygenator*, a 150m² circular pond which existed in the summer of 2007. It was located in the very center of Warsaw, in Grzybowski Square, between the Jewish Theater and what is now the only open synagogue in Warsaw. During World War II, this area was part of the Jewish ghetto and now it has become what Rajkowska has described as “a silent [city] center.”⁴² Grzybowski Square is a sad place: the few miraculously surviving red-brick buildings are dilapidated, some of them have boarded-up windows, and the whole place suffers from overall architectural disarray. On a symbolic level, the place seems to reflect the difficulties of Polish-Jewish relationships. The square is mostly visited, as Rajkowska notes, by Israeli tourists, protected by security officers dressed in bullet-proof vests.⁴³

In 2004, Rajkowska came up with an idea to poke a hole in the omnipresent ugliness and emotional gravity of Grzybowski Square. Her concept was to dig a round hole in one of the neglected lawns, fill it with water decorated with water lilies, circle the pond with flowers and shrubbery, and install ozone-producing machines under the water. In a press release of 2007, Rajkowska and the project’s curator Kaja Pawelek explained:

The curse hanging over Grzybowski Square is typical of Warsaw – it is the curse of unprocessed trauma and of an inability to deal with the tragedy of the ghetto – the tragedy of the Jewish community – with our, Polish tragedy, because it happened here.⁴⁴

³⁷ Ibid., 43.

³⁸ Rajkowska claims that, burdened with all the logistical problems connected with the palm tree installation, this fact had slipped her mind. See: “Niby, żeby, jest,” 42.

³⁹ Rajkowska, “Niby, żeby, jest,” 42. The Christmas tree was later moved to Warsaw’s Old Town, a more representative place that can accommodate all the people who come to Christmas-time festivities.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁴¹ Rajkowska claims that it took six year for the first critical analysis of the project to appear in Poland (Rajkowska, “Niby, żeby, jest,” 43).

⁴² Rajkowska, “Niby, żeby, jest,” 77.

⁴³ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 85.

Rajkowska's goal was not to confront or tell the story of the ghetto, but to come up with something bizarre and magical, something which in no way could be related to the horrific events that took place during the war. She recalled the frequently visiting "Israeli groups that walk across the square (...) [and] pump up their sense of community with trauma and somebody else's guilt."⁴⁵ So instead of pumping up their feelings of trauma and a sense of possible moral superiority, Rajkowska pumped into Grzybowski Square something else: the fresh air of Oxygenator, as if she wanted to literally AIR the place and produce a crack in the discourse. She recounts:

[Sitting by] Oxygenator, nobody told ghetto stories. Not because it was inappropriate, but because there was no place for this kind of remembering. Remembering by Oxygenator was done by being with one another and with oneself, with being with one's own body. If one attains this kind of closeness with one's own body and at the same time with the bodies of others, then I feel that at the same time one attains closeness to one's remembering.⁴⁶

By reconfiguring the context of Grzybowski Square, Oxygenator, at least for a moment dispersed the horrors of the war and German occupation of the city. The very place that was once part of the Jewish ghetto, was now a place of encounters and people's common being together. This being together did not divide the participants along ethnic or cultural lines, but by the sheer capacity of the place.⁴⁷ Oxygenator took their attention off the past and drew them together by the very fact that they could commonly enjoy the place and experience on a very basic, physical level what this place could have been. Even though the installation was taken down after only one summer season, it is still referred to as a powerful locus of semiotic shifts concerning Grzybowski Square and the surrounding area.

I believe that both *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* and *Oxygenator* tackle Polish colonial past in a novel and unexpected way, a way which does not subscribe to any type of discourse aimed at interpreting Poland's relations with the foreign hegemony and Poland's "internal others." Rajkowska, by employing the modes of absurdity and playfulness, seems to put the very idea of otherness in brackets, which, at least to some extent, disarms the ghosts of the past. By allowing people to safely enjoy otherness (what else is a plastic palm tree located in the middle of Warsaw or a water-lily-studded, ozone-radiating pond placed within the boundaries of the former Jewish ghetto?), participants may realize that otherness does not have to be a threatening experience. Particularly with regard to *Oxygenator*, people's enjoyment of the place and their voluntary participation blurred the division between the potential "us" and "others." Instead of the trauma, so deeply associated with Grzybowski Square, pleasure and spontaneous enjoyment emerge as key categories when talking about this installation. Or, as Rajkowska puts it, "a moment when one feels so good that, in a sense, there is no body anymore."⁴⁸ Quite simply: when there is no body, there is no sense of physical difference.

I would like to finish however on a not so optimistic note with a brief mention of Rajkowska's most recent project, the Minaret in Poznań. Here the idea of playfulness fails to apply, as the context of Muslim presence in Poland seems to be completely unprocessed and the post-9/11 political context too immediate. Rajkowska's idea is to transform a no-longer-used paper-factory chimney into a Minaret-like structure: one that looks like a minaret but is not a minaret. The chimney stands close to the city center, on an axis linking the Poznań Cathedral and a former synagogue, now turned into a public swimming pool. Rajkowska explains:

If the Minaret materializes, the character of the whole area will change in a surreal manner. The familiar will become strange. (...) One will have to make an effort to recognize this place again, to understand and assimilate it. (...) This place will be created by the tension between the familiar and the strange, the obvious and the puzzling.⁴⁹

However, with the Minaret, Rajkowska seems to have come to the limits of Polish decision-makers symbolic comfort. Unlike the plastic palm tree that has effectively "replaced" the Christmas tree or the playful Oxygenator, the minaret-like *fata morgana* has not been accepted and sparked hysterical reactions, but at the

⁴⁵ Joanna Rajkowska, interview by Artur Żmijewski, *Rajkowska. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010), 238.

⁴⁶ Rajkowska, "Niby, żeby, jest," 93.

⁴⁷ Rajkowska recounts, "Sometimes people quarreled over the availability of space. I've heard that an elderly man told another elderly man: "Can you give up your seat?" The other responded: "No!" [The first one said:] "But you've been sitting here for over 45 minutes!" (Rajkowska, "Niby, żeby, jest," 94).

⁴⁸ Rajkowska, "Niby, żeby, jest," 93.

⁴⁹ Joanna Rajkowska, "The Minaret," *Joanna Rajkowska Official Website*, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/minaret.php> (accessed March 25, 2011).

same time started a debate.⁵⁰ During the debate, the project has encountered such strong opposition that it seems unlikely that the Minaret will ever materialize. In the verdict of the architectural contest written out for that area of Poznań, the jury stated that:

[We] wish to express our decisively negative stand concerning the intention to turn the former paper factory chimney into the form of a minaret. The Jury feels that this project: a) is alien to the Polish culture; b) overlaps with the visual axis linking the cathedral and the former synagogue building; c) may be conceived as religious provocation; d) may be conceived as an attempt to ridicule religious symbol (...); e) does not have any significant artistic value that would have anything in common with Poznań's cultural life.⁵¹

The last statement at least can easily be proven wrong: there is a 1,500-member Muslim community living in Poznań today, and Islamic people have been living in Poland for centuries. I believe that the Jury's clarification of the verdict reflects the destructive character of thinking in binaries and calls for a new mode of shaping relationships between people who live together yet are separated by historical complexities and present linguistic interpellations.

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⁵⁰ Rajkowska explains: „The *Minaret* started to educate. After the row sparked by the public presentation of the project in 2009 in Poznań we realized that we had to be competent enough to effectively defend the project, that the idea and its visual charm alone were not good enough. So we decided to build a website www.minaret.art.pl, which in our view is to serve as a forum for all the questions, comments and doubts that the *Minaret* provokes. We have not only placed there descriptions and sketches of the *Minaret*, but also opened the website for postcolonial debates and a discussion concerning the problems of refugees in Poland.” (“Niby, żeby, jest,” 145)

⁵¹ Rajkowska, “Niby, żeby, jest,” 140-141.

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Jan Matejko, *Polonia II*, 1863



Joanna Rajkowska in front of her installation
Pozdrowienia z Alej Jerozolimskich/Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie (2002-)



Dotleniacz/Oxygenator, 2007



Minaret/Minaret (computer rendering), (2009-)